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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000804

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [LE](#) [IZ](#) [IS](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: IS NOW THE TIME TO RAISE HIZBALLAH WITH SYRIA?

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter, Reasons 1.4 b and d.

11. (S/NF) Summary: Syria's determined support of Hizballah's military build-up, particularly the steady supply of longer-range rockets and the introduction of guided missiles, could change the military balance and produce a scenario significantly more destructive than the July-August 2006 war. If rockets were to rain down on Israeli civilians in Tel Aviv, Israel would still have powerful incentives, as it did in 2006, to keep Syria out of the conflict, but it might also face compelling reasons for targeting Hizballah facilities in Syria, some of which are in and around populated areas. Syria's current strategic mindset appears to assume Syria could avoid involvement in a new conflict, based largely on its 2006 experience. Syrian leaders also appear convinced that arming Hizballah will increase Syria's leverage in bringing Israel to the negotiating table. As Washington weighs how to approach Syrian officials in upcoming engagement efforts, discussing Hizballah from the perspective of the regional strategic landscape may help to facilitate a "big picture" conversation in which we could challenge these assumptions and focus Damascus on the importance of taking cooperative steps with the U.S. now. Though raising this subject could well distract from a cooperative approach that shows signs of progress after months of investment, we believe sounding a warning, probably in a one-on-one meeting with President Asad, would be worth considering in pursuit of a broader, more strategic dialogue. End Summary.

Is the Strategic Balance Changing?

12. (S/NF) Syria's determined efforts to re-arm Hizballah during and after the July-August 2006 war between Israel and Hizballah have consistently grabbed Israeli headlines, most recently with Israeli Chief of Staff Ashkenazi's November 10 revelation that Hizballah possessed 320-kilometer range rockets. Jane's Defense Weekly reported October 28 on Hizballah's deployment of the first guided surface-to-surface M600 missile on Lebanese soil, with a range of 250 kilometers and circular error probability of 500 meters. Public estimates put Hizballah's stockpile as high as 40,000 rockets and missiles, reinforcing assessments by some experts that

this build-up may portend a shift in the military balance between Israel and its northern nemesis. Hizballah SecGen Nasrallah's recent claims of possessing a capability to "destroy" the IDF may overstate the case for domestic and regional propaganda purposes, but reporting in other channels confirms Nasrallah's bragging on November 11 that Hizballah can sustain fire on Tel Aviv and reach "all of Israel." This capability, if fully used, would represent a quantum leap over the damage and psychological terror Hizballah rockets caused in northern Israel during the 2006 war.

13. (S/NF) There is overwhelming evidence that shows Syria provided not just logistical and other support in moving the weapons, but was the main source of the weapons. Syria's integration of Hizballah into its military doctrine, moreover, means that Hizballah operatives and facilities enjoy a growing footprint in Syria.

14. (S/NF) At least two potential consequences flow from Hizballah's increased capabilities and Syria's role in creating them: (1) If there is another war between Hizballah and Israel, it will be far deadlier than the 2006 conflict; (2) as in 2006, there would be compelling reasons for Israel to want to keep Syria out of any future war if possible, but there might be a countervailing need to hit Hizballah and perhaps targets in Syria, some of which are located in populated areas.

Agreeing to Disagree on Hizballah

DAMASCUS 00000804 002 OF 003

15. (S/NF) U.S.-Syrian discussions on Hizballah have tended to "agree to disagree" after hitting the wall of conflicting views on the legitimacy of armed resistance and Israeli occupation. Syrian officials, including President Asad, emphasize their political link to Hizballah and flatly deny that Syria is arming Hizballah. They then defend the right to armed resistance in response to prolonged Israeli occupation of Syrian and Lebanese territory. When convenient, Syrian officials claim they no longer have responsibility for Hizballah, noting "we are out of Lebanon." President Asad and FM Muallim have also suggested that the challenge of disarming Hizballah would be solved after Syria and Israel signed a peace treaty. This agreement would lead naturally to a deal between Lebanon and Israel, thereby removing the rationale for Hizballah's resistance movement and setting the stage for the transition of Hizballah to a purely political party.

16. (S/NF) The Syrian government's strategic view of relations with Hizballah is difficult to assess with high confidence. According to various contacts, President Asad appears to be focused on the possibility of a new conflict between Israel and Syria, but many suggest he believes that the red lines of the 2006 war would be preserved. According to this model, Syria could avoid direct involvement as long as Israel refrained from striking targets on Syrian soil. Syria also seems to be hedging its bets through improved relations with Turkey, France, and Saudi Arabia, which, Syrian officials probably hope, would object to Israeli attacks against Lebanon and/or Syria.

17. (S/NF) Asad nonetheless appears more convinced than ever that arming Hizballah is necessary for Syrian security and perhaps as a stick to bring the current Israeli government back to negotiations on the return of the Golan. Syrians remain resistant to the notion that Syria bears responsibility for managing a potentially explosive situation that could draw Damascus into a war neither sought nor winnable. They have ably deployed a force field of cognitive dissonance to resist arguments linking Syria's arming of Hizballah and the future prospects of Syrian-Israeli peace negotiations. Israel, they insist, remains the problem, and only a more active U.S. role can bring and sustain a resolution. According to the prevailing Syrian view,

however, U.S.-Syrian relations must normalize before the U.S. can play the role of a credible honest broker.

The Cooperative Approach Shows Potential

¶18. (S/NF) As the interagency continues to plot future plans to engage Syrian officials and thinks about how to recruit other countries to support our efforts, we face a choice not only about the level of our engagement, but about the approach itself. Up to now, U.S. efforts have largely focused on developing a cooperative relationship on issues of mutual interest, such as Iraq and U.S. sanctions. Our four month pursuit of military-to-military cooperation on Iraqi border security represented, in effect, a first step toward establishing a broader and higher-level dialogue on Iraqi security issues, including Syrian support of foreign fighters. After the August 19 bombings Baghdad rendered implementation of this initiative impracticable, discussions in late-September shifted toward a possible CT dialogue. This new focus provides an alternative mechanism to continue discussions on Iraqi security issues such as foreign fighters. Syrian officials appear willing to go along with this approach, as long as the emphasis is on building bilateral relations first. After months of investment, our engagement efforts are close to enabling both sides to exchange positive gestures. This cooperation should help to the stage for more focused discussions on a broad range of issues and strategic choices about the future direction of

DAMASCUS 00000804 003 OF 003

the relationship.

¶19. (S/NF) During this process, U.S. officials have carefully placed markers on key issues, including human rights, IAEA compliance, Bank Aman, Lebanon (e.g., border demarcation), and Palestinians (pushing Hamas to accept the Quartet principles), and the new embassy compound. We have addressed these issues mainly in discussions with Vice Foreign Minister Miqdad and the Syrian Embassy in Washington (with less dialogue between Embassy Damascus and the Syrian MFA). Our view is that the cooperative approach will have more chance of success if we continue to use these channels to deal with such issues, until the relationship can sustain discussion at higher levels that will yield a higher probability of favorable progress.

¶10. (S/NF) Against this backdrop, sending U.S. officials to focus on Syrian relations with Hizballah could distract significantly from our efforts to build a cooperative foothold. There is unlikely to be common ground or any breakthroughs, and a new focus on Hizballah-related issues could further set back our efforts to re-energize the engagement process, not least by spurring the Syrians to demand a reciprocal change in U.S. behavior, e.g., lifting sanctions. Focusing our higher political-level discussions on the issue of foreign fighters provides a more familiar subject with a higher chance for initial progress.

But Hizballah's Arsenal Poses Urgent Challenges

¶11. (S/NF) While the near-term chances for a successful dialogue on Syria's strategic relationship with Hizballah are much lower, the stakes -- the possibility of a regional conflict and significant obstacles to achieving comprehensive peace -- are just as, if not more, urgent. Sharing our concerns about the dangers of Syria's arming of Hizballah, probably best done privately in a one-on-one session with President Asad, could serve to establish the basis of a more frank exchange about Syria's role, and enable us to challenge potentially dangerous Syrian assumptions as part of a wider strategic dialogue. Recent revelations about Syria's role in weapons shipments create some urgency in turning Syrian attention toward ending these supplies and restraining

Hizballah from making good on its provocative rhetoric.

¶12. (S/NF) We don't expect these points immediately to change Syrian behavior or its relations with Hizballah, but we believe sounding this warning would put President Asad and others (such as Turkey and France) on notice that Syria's actions have created a situation in which miscalculation or provocative behavior by Hizballah could prove disastrous for Syria and the broader region. This message could likewise underscore our belief that Syria needs to demonstrate a more active role in achieving peace with Israel and better relations with the United States. Even if a war between Israel and Hizballah does not materialize in the immediate future, we should try find a way to use our ongoing cooperative engagement with Syrian officials to help them recognize their overriding interest and responsibility in preventing this unappealing scenario altogether.

HUNTER